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graham macdonald
untitled



odyssey



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Daniel Spitzberg and **Ilya Zaychik** are all of the following: nuts, bolts, (i.e., the editors), the muscles, l'couiers, writers, artists, apologists... Daniel dreams about the Last Great American Whale and so on... Ilya once printed out a piece of paper that said: "every hour doing something else could be time spent writing."

Read up on our side project, *The Underbrush Creative Writing Hexagon*! <http://theunderbrush.blogspot.com>

next deadline: my goodness, I have no idea
stationæry

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Yesterday night (like every night), I was out on my front stoop, having a smoke. It was one of those quiet, still nights—a perfect night for a smoke. Leaning calmly against the column, thinking about this and that, I suddenly heard a terrible, simply terrible sound to my left. My eyes widened, and I began practically to shake with fear, nearly dropping my cigarette. I didn't dare turn my head. It was someone walking slowly, very slowly, unbearably slowly...One...Two...One...Two...How can someone walk this slow?!, I screamed silently. Every pounding step reverberated in my head—a cave, an empty cave—the sound just bouncing off the inside of my skull forever. The figure shuffled with determined swagger, like a cowboy stepping into a silent town where everyone is awaiting his showdown with the sheriff, and he knows he will walk away alive. I am that sheriff.

I am a fast walker. Always have been, always will be. If I know when and where I have to be, I get there fast. If I don't know those things, I don't walk.

The city is laid out in straight slices. Take a sieve, flatten it out, make it a cookie cutter, press into wet asphalt, and you have the city. I don't consider complications. Some streets are wide, and some are narrow; some have shops, and some have houses. Some have both.

Point A is home. Point B is work. There are sixty-four ways to get from Point A to B. I counted them on my map. I don't know how I choose which way to go. It's not the scenery: I mostly keep my head down. It's not the sunlight: I always walk in the shade. It's not the time: All paths take thirty minutes.

The sounds change with the season. The crunch of winter (snow). The click of summer (ground). The swish of autumn (leaves). The splash of spring (rain). But the rhythm is the same. Onetwo.

Onetwo.

I don't see the difference. One street is another. Tens of parallel lines. Tens of right angles. Simple geometry; proofs are based on equality. All rectangles are the same, doesn't matter where you draw one. Same with streets, cities.

Take the alleys. For every two streets, there is one alley. North-south or east-west. A city in the city. If I want to hear the echo of my steps a block in either direction; if I want garbage instead of parking meters; if I want backyards instead of storefronts; if I want cats instead of people—I take the alleys.

I have a sense of adventure. I do. I have a large map of the area between work and home. I have pictures of every street. Every night I arrange the pictures to form a different path. I study it. There are sixty-four ways to get from Point A to Point B. I have only ever taken one.

His feet were a nightmarish drum signaling my death, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, I could do. I was frozen to the spot. I wanted to shout, to yell at him to move faster or stop moving—anything but this infinitely elastic, inevitable agony!—but I knew the footsteps would drown me out. It was only fifty feet from the corner to where I was standing, but it was ages before the man finally passed me. I looked up at him (barely lifting my head) and saw that his gaze was fixed firmly forward, and he took no notice of me. I stepped out onto the street behind him, careful not to make a sound. I calculated that it would take him twenty minutes to reach the end of the block at his rate. I looked over his shoulder, and wondered where he was going, and how long it would take him to get there, and whether or not he'd be back the next night.

Tonight (like every night) I am out on my front stoop, having a smoke.

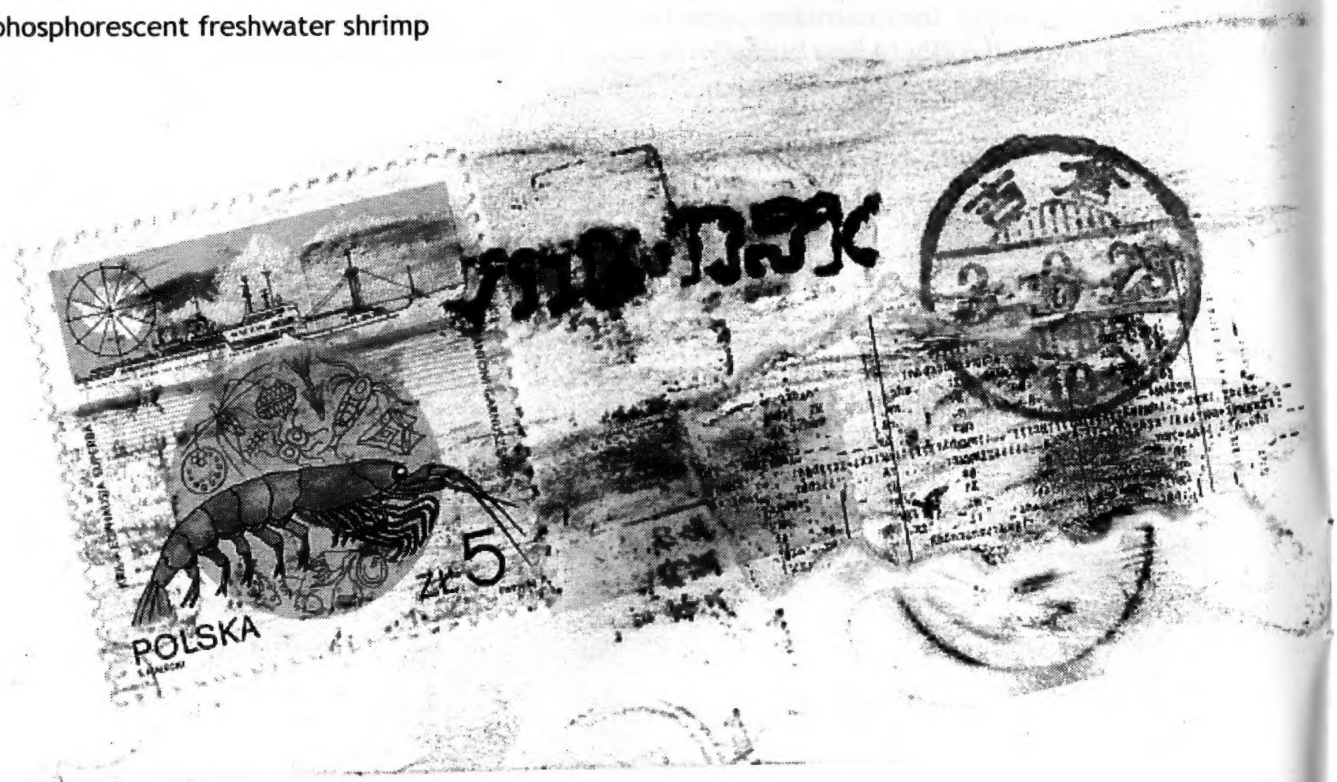
Captain Immer sang loudly to himself, while the little motor chugged in the back of the canoe. His big sunburned face was like the map of a mountain region – patches of varying brown with two small blue lakes. He composed his songs as he went, and his voice was quite tuneless. 'Going home, going home, the food will be good for me-e-e. I don't like the food in that bloody cite-e-e.' He turned out of the main stream into a tributary: a few alligators lay on the sandy margin. 'I don't like your snouts, O trouts. I don't like your snouts, O trouts.' He was a happy man.

The banana plantations came down on either bank: his voice boomed under the hard sun: that and the churr of the motor were the only sounds anywhere – he was completely alone. Feeling the immense tide of boyish joy, doing a man's job, Captain Immer felt no responsibility.

The tributary corkscrewed farther into the marshy estate. Captain Immer opened a tin box and ate a sandwich – food never tasted so good to him outdoors. A monkey offered a chatter from the shore as he went by, and the Captain felt happy and at one with nature – a wide shallow kinship with all the world moved with the blood through his veins: he was at home anywhere. Enjoy a free banana, he thought. He began to sing again – somebody else's words a little jumbled in his friendly un-retentive memory. 'Give to me the life I love, bread I dip in the river, under the wide and starry sky, the hunter's home from the sea.' The plantations petered out, and far behind, the mountains came into view, heavy charcoal lines drawn low across the sky. A few bungalows rose out of the mud. He was home. A very slight cloud marred his happiness.

He thought: after all, a man likes to be welcomed.

derek white
phosphorescent freshwater shrimp



i do find that 少し strange yes. i have taken off my スラックス in many towns and 国。

when i lived in アメリカ i had no trouble see

when i lived in スウェーデン i had no trouble since

nor in オランダ or カナダ nope.

but i noticed it as soon as i arrived in 香港

i immediately felt purposely ignored for the only the second time in my life (the seventh grade breakdancing contest takes the honors as the first).

i expected to arrive in asia as a minority, which i did. i expected that would bring with it millions of sets of eyes looking at me in ways i had never seen, and it has.

curious thoughts of encounters with other western travelers/workers/tourists/magicians never crossed my mind. Why would such meetings take any type of direction other than the same mix from a lifetime of similar encounters? so, when did you come here? what do you do? where did you come from? and numerous other moonmuddy questions. conversations my learning environment encouraged me to learn and engage in with others. a lifetime of pretending that the most important things you should immediately ascertain from a stranger begin with: their name, place of residence/birth, occupation, sign, and social security number. put all the labels in place and you can quickly and efficiently decide if you should hug them or pee on them accurately.

i always travel with an optimistically half-full bladder, the only example of a professionally organized task in my entire skillpouch, so i stocked up on bottled water and left it at that.

but roughly 83 per cent of the foreigners i have stumbled upon during the past seven months in asia have all performed the same action. they ignore each other. you still find most foreigners walking around clumped together like the hot oats, but even they tend to display this odd phenomenon. it makes me wonder why...

most foreigners i have seen here come from the UK, Australia, Canada, or the States. most that look like me have the same experience of living a life closely resembling that of your country's majority population. So finding yourself in a different environment where you no longer physically blend in so easily can understandably alter your behavior, not to mention your variety of selection for assless chaps yes.

so when other foreigners see me, but then commonly act like they just didn't, it makes me brain cureless.

does my presence intrude upon your notions of rugged independence? have i increased the speed of your languishing uniqueness? do you feel as if i have nothing to offer you other than the standard opening monologue? do i project those thoughts on you because they secretly originate within myself? if i can convince myself that you ignore me rather than vice versa, have i only rationalized my actions? have i just rationalized my own rationalizing? have i simply imagined all of this? why have i stopped practicing my japanese? did i feel that somebody reading this would regard it as pretentious? how does assless chaps translate into japanese characters?

uzodinma okehi

Hey little red! Hey! The way to grandma's place is, well—Well it's right here! . . . That was Benoit, standing atop a trash can at the corner, holding onto his crotch like it was a holstered pistol, a derringer . . . Kira was across the street, wearing khaki pants, not too tight, not too sleazy mind you and that red cashmere sweater. She gave us the finger and kept walking. Kira being Kira, shaped like a fireplug, fat under her arms and that too-plump lower lip. Same Kira who'd announced in the morning that she was dark enough, that if we were Black heroes then she was one as well, by default, and because of that we'd have to start calling her "Kero", get it? Kira, who wasn't pretty, who looked like a Mexican, but with just the right bounce in her walk that could make a guy follow all the way to Hell and back. For anyone who'd missed that little scene at the crosswalk, she'd be around the block again in an hour or so and it'd pretty much be more of the same, that was the routine. A little one act play, a box within a box, more like a vignette than a streetwalk, to get the ball rolling. Because we were innocent types, all naïfs, you understand. Every girl, I believe, especially the shorter ones, if you're looking, have something they can enthrall you with. But that's not what this is about . . .

nautical song (big trouble for soloists...)

And I want to mention that it was that same old stretch of sidestreet every time, same chance, same miraculous night . . . in as if from a dream . . . Some nights it'd start off with me and Benoit with our arms around each other's back, strutting down the sidewalk like the beginning of "The Monkeys" . . . shucking and smiling . . . Black Heroes, like dicks, or, pause-

Or, rather, ethnological speak: Those heroes, like black netherworld guys . . . Which, in the midst of some group of white dudes, some Australians or Swedes or Dutch seamen—in the midst of it, the game, this was our easy and ludicrous talk, something Benoit might say with a wink, underscored by some airy gesture . . . Quick, pal, double the E . . . Even, on occasion, with fellow Americans, and when they turned from Benoit to me, like they always did, I'd make sure to be leaning against something, a balustrade, a door frame, flame just poised front of dangling cigarette, because it was an act, a free-jazz jam session in which it was effortlessly sensical for me to come back with: Baby, tumble the quick, bumble the glide . . . Then together, the chorus, but while looking off in different directions, as incidental as not, as easy if it was ordering brunch, try to say it without smirking . . . "E" as in ass, free as the vehicle . . .

And even to get right down to the point, get to it, even as sharp as one could be about it, sometimes there was no more direct way than to spend all night fucking around in just this fashion . . . Or sometimes I'd start out on Nathan Road, following some girl . . . double the slide . . . Sometimes bombastic, big-talk, boisterous, sometimes subdued, even stalker-like, sometimes, though those were the rare occasions that I felt bad about it . . . Sometimes though, it was pitch-perfect and I'd be able to match her, step-for-step, jogging backwards, make a show of it . . . I'd seem to get enraged as she continued to ignore utterly my ludicrous catcalling . . . Enraged, then dejected, and after that it was just a matter of dialing down the act a little . . . Hey Rube! . . . humble and blithe . . . Just enough to be able to sidle close to any choice group, that is, whichever crowd of white guys seemed to find the most humor in my plight . . .

And it wasn't an act! That's what I could safely say about it . . . Those Chinese girls, all-night, all the time, those no-how, no-way babies, but like a sailor's dream, extra-fine . . . The nights might be sweltering but it was a cold city sometimes, trying to score on the up-and-up . . . And that's why it was easy pickings on our end of things . . . That was why it was infinitely possible to lean out from under awnings or drop down from a darkened stoop this way and begin spouting the sort of pure nonsense that ultimately said little, that uncovered nothing, but that worked wonders because it singed nerves . . . To leave it to Benoit, it was all so mystical-sounding, all so much about the secrets that we think to ourselves deep down about it, but which we've so recently been told to zip-up and hide away as civilized life is made further and more civil, as all sorts of new rules are dreamed up as if in a complete vacuum, removed from reality, pal, think sexual bureaucracy, and while great strides are being made to convince us to continue emasculating ourselves . . . and so on . . .



alexander vail
it was not (my intention)

Rather, it was Benoit's technique, so-finely tuned, that was mystical like a honeycoat on the blow from a baseball bat . . . Float out on the block . . . subtext, sub-paragraph, paint-picture, move-talk . . .

And it was quite a tune! . . . mooth swalk . . . I'd never been a big fan of the hard sell but at the end of it he'd have these jokers laughing, beaming under his abuse as if from everyone's favorite older brother . . . He'd be calling them pussies, or with a big smile punching guys twice his size suddenly in the stomach . . . Like Batman, strip-bash, black hero . . . Dropping into the middle of four, even five dudes, no luck, just talking non-stop, that was Benoit, and we'd roll em' . . . Or like Waldo, where's all the ass up in this motherfucker . . . comma, parentheses . . . Exclaimed Benoit, knowingly . . . Man, shit! . . . And when he went to lead in, I was there to fill the gaps, to close parentheses, to chime in over dead air, and when necessary to play cleanup with a touch of my own stock material . . . Those certain things that you could just keep saying time and time again, no matter who'd heard it twice . . . Forget about all that for a second and just let me tell you one secret about Chinese girls . . .

And there was no secret about Chinese girls! . . . I remember shrugging about it one evening . . . I remember late evenings like magic hour, that maze of hallways beneath the Wing Wah, opening onto an alleyway full of puddles reflecting streaking clouds and far-off fire . . . I remember heading out into the street every night like some cop-show duo . . . There was only even a single Chinese girl at the Wing Wah that I can ever remember . . . Filipinos . . . Plenty of Indian

girls; Kira, for instance . . . Laotian, Korean, Malays, Mongols but only one Chinese and no secrets . . . Just the same old civilized misdirection . . . And the ass wasn't free either! . . . Nothing's free, cellular phone, flip-talk, take way one or another baby, you probably pay . . . That was my line, another moonwalk, since I was always the good cop if there was rare trouble in paradise . . . And that was the language, the palaver of it . . . I had the soft sell, whereas Benoit brought them in bunches as if to rush for a frat house, but then those were the situations that could sometimes get out of hand . . . Maybe I even did as well as Benoit, or near enough, numberwise, when all was said and done . . . The important part, in any case, was to keep the thing going, and after a while we became monologists, or like a duet team, obsessed with the lyrics, because we were convinced the genius of it was that we were selling the truth . . . Because that was the real closer . . . What brought them in was the all-true fact that a guy needs ass like food and water, whether we were up there shamming or not, acting or not, whether it was all smooth talk or Kira in that red cashmere sweater, watch her come round that corner, change of heart, up to us, back abruptly, kitten purring for milk . . . Those heroes . . .

And sometimes it was just that pure inertia, the two of us spouting all that mash-mouth haiku on the street, then later, whether it was later that night, the next day, or in my case, soft-sell, sometimes even weeks later, to come up those narrow stairs and see us all clowning around like family, all those girls laughing, walking around barefoot, and Mr. Leung with his legs crossed, doddering, smoking, chuckling in the corner sitting on his little stool, like an old saint at the doorway to paradise, then back to me and Benoit, maybe the green-sequined jackets we'd had made up, maybe not, but as usual, jumping out of our socks, dancing, fooling around with the girls, playing football with a rolled up sock in stocking feet, or Benoit would be darting around like a bull with someone playing matador, not usually but sometimes even me, because even I wasn't immune . . . Or sprawled out on the couches, a deep thicket of fourteen girls in tube skirts . . . Watching Godzilla films, for instance, or over a fine takeout feast . . . What the hell are you staring at, man? Have a seat, grab some kung-pow! . . . Or those Mega Man foam suits, another custom job, me and Benoit running back and forth like young millionaires, tackling each other in the hallway, to Benoit tiptoeing around in black with a plastic knife, Danger Diabolik, to fighting with waterguns, or Nerf pistols, or bubble wands, or the fact that the whole whorehouse thing seemed so incidental . . . Like surface to air, such submersible tact! . . .

Or Rather, inexpiable doubt, word-gift, journey to the end of the night . . . Because it is almost always by pure accident that one comes across the miraculous role repetition plays in adapting to life . . . to any kind of life . . . In other words, this was the language and I began to speak it because I could see how it made people comfortable, whores and guys alike . . . Less than a year before I'd been in college, and when I dropped out it was because I figured I had no real knack for studying . . . Now here I was, more than a student and taking careful note, measuring gazes, calculating subtle adjustments as I earned my room and board at the Wing Wah . . . More like a genius of banished opprobrium, which was how I felt, glad-handing guys at the top of the stairs, introducing them to the girls . . . More often than not it was Kira they wanted to see, or some girl like her, and I could see it coming . . . Kira who was in love with Benoit, hopelessly, even if she never said it, which was just one of those things you'd have plenty of time to study too if you were living in a whorehouse . . . Kira . . . And I guess I fucked her too, a couple of times, off the clock . . . Stay Frosty soldier! That's what I'd tell her . . . I'd get her in a headlock and execute her point-blank with a dose from my watergun . . . How old was I back then? Nineteen? Twenty? . . . Bom! Bom! Bom! . . . Short, controlled bursts . . . Out of all the girls, she was the only one who paid enough attention during action movies to pick up those details . . . Some but not all . . . I remember night-missions, in the corridors and stairwells that could sometimes go on for hours . . . So many times, I had to stop and ask her why she was making those noises . . . Bom! Bom! . . . They're waterguns! . . . yelling around the corner . . . Kira! What the fuck?! . . .

Gift

It is simple, the act of touching,
two bodies lying under blankets,
each one warm from the other's warmth.

As the day descends to darkness,
each heart pulses like a drum,
like a clock wound in the womb.

How easy we touch in the darkness,
white dots of fire in our eyes,
the blanket of sleep under our arms.

It is simple, how he gets up and looks
out the window at the cover of snow
on the hill, the blue frosting of moonlight

divided by black tree forks, it is simple,
how the cigarette smoke rises against
the frost, and the red tip of ash contends

with the stars to the west—I know we are
salt and earth, and while I sleep, he departs,
to wed silence and walk among the palms.

We never speak again of snow,
never share salt again, it is simple,
how we separate and sleep alone.

Nelson C. Agustin

nelson agustin
voyages joyeux dans les plumes blanches



jeremy bp taylor

orlaith's feeling much better

Orlaith's feeling much better, she says, and i smile unconvincingly in an effort to prove her right.

a boy with freckles and a nice smile walks by, wearing a uniform and carrying a tray of mugs. he looks at me, but at my eyes, and for a second i imagine that he's smiling at me because he thinks i'm pretty, the way he might smile at any pretty girl. and then i curse simultaneously and equally the two human traits that give us the need to drive fast and to pity cripples, and i wheel the machine that's attached to me as far under the table as it will go.

from miles away i hear my mother cackle garishly, and i see that she has turned to the woman at the table beside us and is waving her cigarette with emphatic glee.

once again i wonder exactly which ten percent it is that we only use of our brains.

the boy with the tray and the smile comes back and rolls his eyes irresistibly at me while trying to step around my shouting mother.

later, as we're leaving, i will watch her grab him by the arm, as if to impart a secret of great privilege, and with the most earnest of eyes, whisper:

that was the best coffee i've ever had.

i will want to grab him too, and tell him other things—so much bigger things.

but i can't, and besides, we never tell men what we're thinking, do we orlaith. that's not what they want to hear.





James Culleton

james culleton
Countouring Montréal



angie thielmann
untitled

Eight hours hunched in front of an almost blank screen, and Chas Lyman Morris has typed only seven words. He needs one more.

"A strong wind blows; just spread your..."

"...wings," he types at last, but isn't satisfied. He hits <backspace> a few times, makes an alteration.

"It blows; just spread."

It's been 17 years for Chas at the Mid-American Fortune Cookie Company, and he's about to get himself fired.

With a grim look he saves his work and mechanically gathers his things to leave. The last one out of the factory, he locks the door behind him and finds his car in the empty lot. On the drive home through wide empty streets, stretches of faded cracked asphalt dully reflecting red and green stoplights, he hopes the plan will work this time. His last few attempts to get canned only resulted in promotions and raises.

The first try, 10 years ago, was after he realized he was sick of the job. That's when he began asking himself if he really wanted to stay there, keep a job that was initially just supplemental income between monthly paychecks from the niche publication he moved to the small Nebraska town to write for, "Feline Aficionado." He was the kitty litter section editor. Fresh out of college with a degree in journalism but few prospects, an old roommate offered him the job and he figured he had to start somewhere. Around the same time he decided to put to use his minor, Mandarin, by translating ancient Chinese proverbs for an all-in-house fortune cookie company that took its mission quite seriously, despite employing no one with ancestry east of Milwaukee. The magazine folded within a year, but without any other immediate prospects he stayed at the plant.

Seven years passed. Little by little he began to realize he hated his job – years of training just to type pithy platitudes to be crammed into bent cookies – but couldn't let himself simply quit, so deeply ingrained were his dad's admonitions to always finish what he started. He should stick it out, his father would have said, suck it up and just be glad he was gainfully employed. Chas' dad spent 40 years himself packing ships into bottles down on a factory floor in Kansas, so what right had he to complain, with his own office and his work read by millions of noodle-stuffed diners every year? No, he couldn't quit, but being fired was another story. So he began to devise ways, subtle ways. Nothing too big, he didn't need a bad reference; just enough to suggest to his boss maybe he wasn't cut out for the cookie factory anymore.

The tactic he decided on was intentionally doing a shitty job translating, picking the wrong words and using poor grammar and syntax. Very small, discreet errors, but mistakes he shouldn't normally make. "Rife comes up air un handkerchiefs," for instance, and so on. Instead of seeing them as mistakes, though, his boss praised the bad translations as more "authentic," more real and less forced, without the artsy flourishes everyone else in the industry forced on them, and started Chas writing the fortunes himself instead of merely translating.

The new position wasn't so bad, Chas figured. It paid well, and brought him a certain prestige in the fortune cookie industry; he became known as the "heppy ruck foltune" guy. Once or twice he even took paid trips to China, for "inspiration." A dream of his since he first began learning

the language, the experience was tainted by his having to play the PR guy representing his company at meetings among all the big fortune cookie magnates. He resented his job even more for that.

Not that he had any delusions of grandeur. No one's life changed after cracking open a stale cookie at the end of a greasy box of dog'n'noodles; they usually belched, threw away the anonymous author's work, then got hungry again an hour later. So Chas grew even more miserable and tried harder to get fired. His attempts became increasingly blatant, gross misspellings and almost nonsensical phrases. But it wasn't enough. Each rendition, falling short of vague blather and outright keyboard mashing, only earned Chas more acclaim from his boss for his "bold new take" on the "art of fortune composition."

Even when he did eventually stoop to pure gibberish, pounding the keyboard with his forehead in frustration, his boss blithely took it for some sort of code, claiming to see a deeper hidden meaning in the fruit of smashed keys. "That last one was great, Chuck," he'd say the morning after a new shipment, "it really spoke to me."

Soon Chas took another route. Recalling a game he used to play during take-out cram sessions with friends in college, he tacked the phrase "in bed" at the end of every fortune, once he'd worded them in an obviously suggestive way. "Your affairs will be discreet ... in bed." They got worse and worse, outright flagrantly dirty. "Not even a tranny, two goats and a chicken could help you get it up... in bed." The "blow" one was his latest. Now he needed to see if it worked.

Next morning Chas comes in, three hours late, and drops into the chair at his charm-laden desk. Rabbit paws, dice and clovers and horseshoes, even a voodoo doll (of his boss; he had scribbled a black mustache onto it, like the pushbroom that hung limply over the man's upper lip that he'd grown to loathe over the past 17 years), and some cursed Haitian chicken bones, all gathered for inspiration back when he cared about his job. Now they gather dust.

As he reaches for the voodoo doll a small woven tube beside it catches his eye, a Chinese finger trap. When Chas was three his older brother, who only ever called him Lymie, gave him the trap and told him it was an ancient torture device, a gift from an Oriental mystic. In truth it was a cheap skeeball prize he won at the fair. Little Lymie got his fingers stuck in it and cried, unable to understand why it held on tighter the harder he pulled.

Traumatic as it was for three-year-old Chas to have his fingers caught by the ancient torture device, it's what began his interest in Mandarin studies. He was fascinated when his brother finally showed him how to get it off, and at that moment decided he wanted to find out everything he could about the strange culture that would make such a neat, bizarre thing. He only learned much later the handcuffs were no more an Asian invention than the cookies his factory churns out.

Stabbing an unbent paperclip between the doll's googly eye, he scans the piles of books also covering his desk – haikus, wise little sayings, Russian poslovitsi, dirty limericks – then grabs one at random, leans back, legs outstretched, and thumps his heels down on the edge of the desk. His boss walks by and catches him in the position of loafing, but only takes notice of the book in his hands.

"Hard at work I see, Chester" he enthuses, stepping uninvited into the office, his mustache wagging. What hair remained on his head had grayed, contrasting starkly with the jet-black whiskers, freshly dyed. A little too fresh – they left an inky stain on the rim of the coffee cup he held in his hand. "I read over all your latest masterpieces this morning. Going for a 'less is more' approach, I see. I love it!"

Chas nods, not looking up. His stomach drops and he clenches his teeth, waiting for the blow: probably another commendation. With his luck he'd be named vice-president within the week.

His boss waits a few minutes for a response, rocks back and forth on his heels. Picks a knick-knack up from the desk, turns it over in his hands, sets it back down.

"...well, I won't bother the genius at work anymore. I'm sure you have some real humdingers just brewing in that bean of yours now. Here, have a cookie." He tosses a cellophane-

wrapped fortune cookie Chas' way, which bounces off his chest and settles in his lap, then leaves. Chas savagely rips the package open and crushes the cookie in one fist, slaps his palms clean over the trash can. He glances at the little slip of paper that landed on top.

"It blows; just spread."

By the end of the day Chas is pounding out undisguised death threats.

"Hope you enjoyed your last meal."

"A bus is waiting to hit you outside."

He works methodically, without malice, but the threats grow worse and worse.

He's glad, and not for the first time, for the anonymity his literary outlet allowed. He shuts down his computer after about five dozen death messages and leaves work early.

The next afternoon finds him at his desk even later than usual, determined to get out. Chas has no employment options in mind for after getting fired, but that doesn't matter. There is no next step; forcing his woollybear-lipped boss' hand is all that matters. Today has to be the day.

Absolutely certain that the death threats would at last do the trick, he starts packing his things. He wants to leave the moment he sees the first angry red blotches appearing on his boss' face. He picks up one of the many unopened box of cookies sitting around his office, tears it open and spills its contents onto the floor, then holds it against his side with one elbow and sweeps armloads of trinkets and books into it from his desk. A minute passes and his boss walks in.

"Knock-knock. Hey listen Chester, we've got to talk. About those fortunes you wrote yesterday."

Here it comes.

"They really are quite... well I see they're edgier than usual, wouldn't you say?"

Chas says nothing, only waits for it. He reaches for another book to throw in the box.

"I mean, no no don't get me wrong, edgy is good. It's the thing now, being all extreme... like the kids say, you know. With an X," the little mouth continues, as the fuzzball undulates above it. "In fact, it's perfect for this new line of cookies I've been planning to unveil. They'll be edgier, more extreme flavors - like, I don't know, Amazing Shrimp Guava, Pineapple Trout Pizazz. Something. Anyway, it'll appeal to the younger fortune cookie eater out there... and your work is just the thing! So you think you could write me up a few more like that?"

The book falls from Chas' hand, misses the box and lands with a dull slap onto the floor. His boss looks down at it, then at Chas.

"Wow, packing already? So you heard? News travels fast around here, I see. You can move

into your new office upstairs after they're done stenciling your name on the door. It's a bit bigger; you'll have more room for all your toys."

Chas says nothing again; his eye twitches.

"Well I can see you're stunned. Come round my office and give me a knock when you're all moved in." He smiles; black dye stains his upper front teeth. "We'll talk about your brilliant new ideas. Well, see ya."

The box drops from his arms as his boss leaves. Books and horseshoes and little metal puzzles scatter, the voodoo doll lands at his feet, the goggle-eyed effigy of his boss grinning up at him. Chas steps on it, hard, then kicks it across the room. He proceeds to kick and stomp over the cookies littering his floor, with the popping of plastic wrappers and crunching of fortune cookies like beetle shells. He grits his teeth.

Boxes of cookies along the wall are his next victim, their contents flying into the air as he tears into them, kicking and flailing. One box sticks to his shoe. He grunts, shakes it off, then brings both fists down onto the next. Slips of paper fly around the room like confetti, each one bearing one of his sordid inscriptions.

He turns and attacks his desk, knocking everything to the ground. But as he tries to lift his bulky computer monitor to hurl it through the flimsy wall, he slips on wrappers and crumbs covering the ground. The backward fall knocks the wind out of him.

A sluggish ceiling fan stares down at him when he opens his eyes minutes later. Blinking, he takes a few slow, deep breaths, then reaches out to push against the ground and sit up. Something catches his finger.

Staying flat on his back, he brings his hand up into view. His purple bamboo Chinese handcuffs are stuck up to the knuckle on the ring finger of his right hand. He stares at it.

Chas lifts his left hand and slips the corresponding digit into the other end of the woven bamboo tube. He pulls. And pulls harder. The trap only hugs his fingertips tighter. Then he pushes. His fingers slip easily free, the trap falls lightly onto his chest.

He lays on the ground a moment longer, then gets up. Finding his chair, fallen onto its back and kicked into a corner of the room, he slides it before his desk and eases in. He readjusts his monitor, brings up a new blank file, and types a single phrase.

"I hope you enjoyed your meal, sir." The attractive waitress sets down his bill as Chas pushes away the remnants of his zong zi dumplings and eases back in his chair at a table several months later and thousands of miles away. He smiles and thanks her in her own language, then retrieves his briefcase from under the table and stands up. He drops the correct amount of renminbi on the table and turns to leave, but as an afterthought picks up the cellophane-wrapped cookie that came with his check. "Genuine American Fortune Cookie" is stamped on it, above a drawing of a smiling bear and, in smaller letters, below that, "M-AFCC." He unwraps the cookie and cracks it in two, sticks one half in his mouth, tugs a slip of paper out of the other half, reads it, then crunches on that piece. He drops the fortune on the table and leaves.

The slip of paper flutters down, lands face-up on his plate.

"You will soon relish the taste of freedom."

derek white
the shadow puppet cargo charges



a good long sit on the porch

josh cook

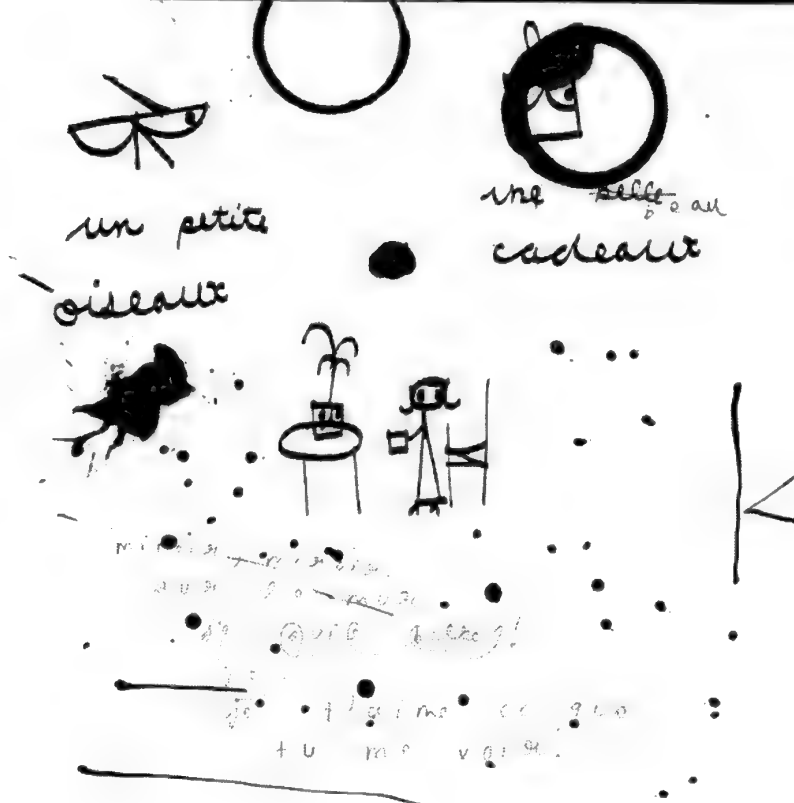
You sit on a porch long enough you get to thinking that the problem with societal change is that those with the most power to enact it, usually have the least reason to do so; that Proust was trying to tell us that we are the narrators of our lives, but we usually get too caught up in the details of the plot to enjoy how the story is told; you get to wondering what's going on across the street and you get to noticing the TVs flashing in all the windows; you get to say say "hi" to strangers maybe even chat about the weather. And I know for a fact it's a whole lot easier to watch women walk by from a porch than from a couch.

But it's got to be an urban porch. Sure those rural and suburban porches let you look out into nature, hear animals, watch leaves fall, smell streams just hidden from view, but you don't think that much when you're looking at nature. Most of the time you say to yourself "Hey, I'm looking at nature, and I like what I see." No, you need a porch where people can see you on the porch. Then you have the pressure to read impressive books and take Baudrillardish notes and drink beer and smoke a damn good smelling pipe and look up at your house mate when the door opens behind you and say, "You know, I was just thinking about the barriers built into the brain that prevent us from taking real control of our delusions and was hoping to get your input." It's all about timing though. Don't waste that porch line on just anybody walking by. Don't read Song of Myself out loud over a steak-grilling hibachi for just any passer-by.

On a porch you can see a labor-day block party building steam, while cars drive a collage radio station by, and footballs bounce from backyards into the street, and smoke rises from near sidewalk grills and you think that even though nobody should need a holiday to remind them to be kind or give thanks or take a break from all the work they do, you probably wouldn't be able to stroll your beer down the street to where some new neighbors are blasting hip-hop if it wasn't Labor Day. And

daniel cambil

miroir, miroir.
sur lar mur
je suir belle!
je
je t'aime ce que
tu me voir



you can think that you're pretty happy sitting on your porch sipping your beer, even though you don't understand why you get sucked into video games and that hospital mystery TV show House and Internet porn and even though you promise yourself damn near everyday to cut those things out of your life so you can sit and think on your porch more, like you tried with chemical based microwaveable food and sugar stacked sodas, you still end up in front of the TV to unwind after work for a few hours and especially at 9 on Tuesdays.

Sometimes, when I'm real lucky on a porch, Otis Redding's "Dock of the Bay," gets into my head, and I think about all the ships in my life that I just like to sit back and watch and how it feels good sometimes to swing my legs in empty air even though it doesn't get me anywhere. I feel like I can sit with nothing all day when that happens. Sure it's nihilistic, but no more nihilistic than when someone comforts you by saying, "Don't worry it will all be OK."

I'm not writing this on a porch. My apartment right now doesn't even have a porch. I steal sits on neighbors' stoops when it gets too much to stand. Because it's spring. Even in this windowless room, I know that I never would've thought to write this if I still had a porch. My motivation came from an absence. I know it's a trite cliché to say that we can only appreciate what we've lost, but that doesn't make it any less frustrating.

And if I had a porch right now, I'd be able to figure out why evolution let such a stupid thing happen.

m. lecrivan

his best guess

He liked to make a game of it.

On Mondays and Thursdays, she sat in the same corner of the Metro. As always, she never noticed the tidal wave of graffiti that loomed over her head.

She always smiled, her lips gently curved upward. He never considered the source. It was a smile of reminiscence, of distraction.

He always stood off to the side, held onto his favorite pole while he watched her, and asked himself the same question.

What was she remembering today?

He ran through his list of possible scenarios:

It could've been the time her father left a flower on her desk? It was her favorite; a calla lily.

Was it the texture of spinach hummus on pita bread?

Maybe it was an infamous line from a sitcom, with contagious canned laughter roaring in the background.

Or that day in second grade when she ran around the playground wearing paper bracelets and a crown, and told all the kids she was Wonder Woman.

Could it have been the afternoon she won five bucks off a lotto scratcher?

Maybe it was the image of the dignified wreath of pipe smoke that curled around her grandfather's head. It clashed with the pile of Hustler magazines he perused each evening before dinnertime.

Was it the feel of the wind tugging through her hair as she pumped herself back in forth on the old tire swing?

How about an almost love affair in San Diego?

An almost one-night stand in Belfast?

Probably...well, maybe it was a really kick-ass Martini...with four olives...on a tiny red plastic sword.

He never asked her.

He was content with his imaginings.

To ask would've spoiled the game.

He never knew what she was thinking. It was the same thing she thought of every time she saw him on the Metro. The same memory came into her head, and left the moment he got off at his stop.

The first time she saw him, he was leaning against that same pole, acting arrogant and cool.

He smiled at her....

and her eyes ducked down...

to the open fly of his jeans.

jd smith

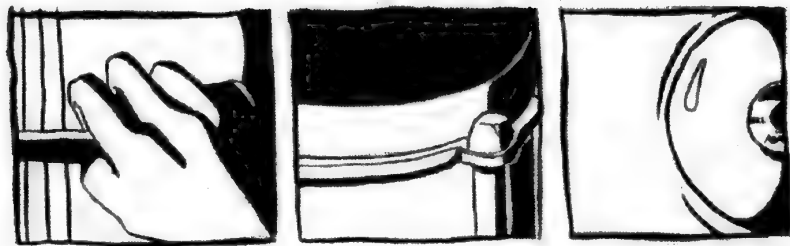
a transition

When does one no longer wish
to move like a dancer, instead
being a dancer
like whom others wish to move?

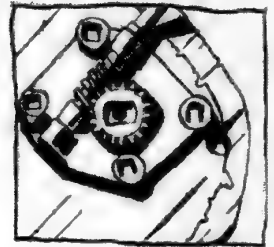
In mid-step, when effort
ceases to be effort.

In sleep, when practiced rhythms
assimilate into the limbs
at last, as one drop
turns a crown of surface tension
into a cascade.

In an instant like those
observed in the most minute physics,
known only by before and after.



mike beard
(above) untitled
(facing) untitled





samantha mirlesse
untitled

lawrence pettener

wild life, april, england

Winter was just three weeks back
when I told a Broadmead beggar –
“Change? Yes please, love,
I’ll change into a butterfly.”
She fluttered her long lashes and said:
“Why not open that bottle of wine?”
Without hesitation I declined,
kept it bottled.

A post-party park. I waken
into wild life; a cat trickles by
like a stream of consciousness.
Birds chirp, oblivious.
Trees are ringed by crocii,
nature’s graffiti,
voting for the all-night party:
“Spring is here, okay!”
Bees are fuzzy headed,
jasmine-tranced.

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The Last Great American Whale



2021